



## Learning from Differences – Towards Professionalism via an International Course

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Peer-reviewed article; received 03 May 2018; accepted 15 October 2018

### Abstract

This paper presents a case study of an intensive international course aimed at pre-service teachers and having a focus on inclusion. The course was funded by Nordplus. Twenty-three students from six Baltic and Nordic countries were interviewed during and after the course on their views on professionalism and their future work as teachers. The results show that the students' understanding of professionalism was multifaceted, and they had gained several experiences of professionalism during the course. One of the main results of this study is, in our opinion, the co-operation and the opportunities the intensive course afforded the students in developing skills to work together with different people, to appreciate difference and to learn from others. In other words, to become more open-minded. This allows us to conclude that students can be trained to consider the importance and understanding of knowledge and its use for now and in the future. Thus, providing such short-term international opportunities is an important part of studying and becoming a teacher or social pedagogue for the globalized future.

**Keywords:** professionalism; professional teacher; reflective professionals; teacher education

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## Introduction

Schools are vibrant and transformative institutions that call for staff—teachers—with a strong professional awareness combined with reflective thinking (OECD, 2010). Parallel to developments in societies and schools in recent decades, for example, regarding diversity in all its aspects and the requirement of meeting students' individual needs on an equal basis, teachers' professionalism needs to include elements not only relating to academic knowledge (Hargreaves, 2000) but also how to reach out to all students and how to maintain collaboration and teamwork with colleagues. Hargreaves (2000) has highlighted the importance of collaboration and teamwork to ensure that teachers are better prepared to tackle the uncertainty which is part of, and indeed inherent in, teachers' multiple professional duties. It is also our view that teacher education needs to and should prepare future teachers to become reflective professionals with a strong awareness of their professional base.

According to Robson (2011), in order to gain important intercultural experience, students need to be provided with opportunities to study in different contexts, with peers from diverse backgrounds or in ethnically diverse communities. Furthermore, she argues, relying on Campbell (2010, p. 494), that skills development “is a process influenced by the cultural, ideological, economic, and political context in which it occurs.” Moreover, emotional and intellectual engagement with real tasks facilitates “the activation and development of higher-level cognitive processes and autonomous learning skills” (De Vita, 2007, p. 167). This can enable students to re-think their “situatedness in the world” and the “political meaning of intercultural experiences” (Parsons, 2010; Rizvi, 2009, pp. 264–265; in Robson, 2011, p. 623). Thus, internationalization has a significant effect and can be implemented in many ways, one of which is presented in this paper.

The aim of the paper is to present Nordic and Baltic students' experiences of a Nordic CSEI (Comparative Studies in Education with a Focus on Inclusion in a Baltic-Nordic Context) course and their views on professionalism relating to their future work as teachers. The paper offers a novel perspective on international courses: We were interested in seeking any learning outcomes beyond the actual aims and topic of the course, which was an intensive international course financed by Nordplus. The aims of the Nordplus Programme are: to strengthen and develop Nordic educational cooperation; to support, develop, draw benefit from and disseminate innovative products and processes in education through exchange; to contribute to the enhancement of quality; to promote Nordic and Nordic-Baltic languages; and to strengthen language comprehension and encourage interest in these languages.

In this particular course programme, *inclusion* was the key topic. During the course, this theme was worked with during several ways and from different perspectives related to students' development as professionals. In the beginning, the student groups from each country had to analyze their national curriculum and present the ways in which inclusion was manifested, and also to focus on current research. Another task consisted of school visits during which the students could observe and experience how inclusion was being

practiced in the classrooms. They were able to talk with the teachers, pupils, and the principal, and ask questions. After the visit, they would discuss and reflect upon the experiences with the other students in cross-national groups. In this way, the students gained insight and knowledge of their own national educational system and curricula, as well as others, in a comparative perspective. It was also a cultural exchange of knowledge, experiences, and reflections.

The participants in the course presented here were pre-service teacher students and social pedagogues from seven Nordic and two Baltic countries. The aim of the study, as explained above, was to explore the students' experiences of a Nordplus CSEI course and their views on professionalism, including an exploration of the student's experiences and how the course contributed to their understanding of professionalism. The research questions were as follows:

1. *What is the students' understanding of professionalism?*
2. *What professional experiences do the students talk about?*
3. *How do the students think these experiences could contribute to their work as professional teachers?*

The theoretical framework is based on ideas about teachers' professionalism and how teachers build their own professional theory. One aspect is, for example, the importance of sharing knowledge and building a network for the future. The authors also draw on literature that discusses ways in which teachers can be prepared for student diversity in relation to the changing role of education with an added emphasis on the social aspects of students and their learning.

## **Teachers' professionalism and competences in diverse societies and schools**

Hargreaves (2000) argues that the ways teachers are seen and see themselves as professionals have passed through four phases, namely, the pre-professional age, the age of the autonomous professional, the age of the collegial professional and, finally, the post-professional or postmodern age. According to Hargreaves, teachers talk about "*being professional*" in terms of the quality of what they do; and of the conduct, demeanour and standards which guide it" (2000, p. 152). Furthermore, they also talk about being *a professional*, which means "how teachers feel they are seen through other people's eyes—in terms of their status, standing, regard, and levels of professional reward" (2000, p. 152). Hargreaves (2000) argues that we are on the edge of postmodern professionalism when teachers face a diverse and complex clientele and intensified work demands.

Sachs (2016), on the other hand, talks about a mature profession, by which she means a view of teaching that is no longer questioned or contested, and thus removes the need to discuss the issue of whether or not teaching is a profession. A mature profession takes a transformative view of teacher professionalism, seeking to develop teachers who are creative designers of curricula and innovative pedagogues, but also collaborate on a deep

level with colleagues, students and stakeholders (Mockler, 2005). Sachs (2016) also argues that as mature professionals, teachers need to possess skills as producers and consumers of research, as well as being able to establish trust among and between the various stakeholders and constituencies. According to Sachs (2016):

Teacher professional learning must have two outcomes: first is the development of competent practitioners who are able to deliver, assess and improve student learning; and second, which is probably more politically difficult, is remembering the important role of education and schooling as a broader social endeavour. (p. 423)

It is considered important for teachers to build a strong professional ethos, enabling them to create their own professional theory that guides them in their work. Such a theory must be based on the interplay of the elements of theoretical knowledge, experience-based knowledge and ethical values (Hoyle, 2001; Ingvarsdóttir, 2004; Jóhannesson, 2006; Smyth, Dow, Hattam, Reid, & Shacklock, 2000).

The EU Commission report (2017) on preparing teachers for diversity states that teachers must be effectively prepared to “embrace the benefits of diversity for schools and all students” (p. 23). The authors of the report argue that teachers are an important aspect of the quality of the educational system, and, in turn, they suggest four characteristics of teacher quality:

- personal characteristics: values, attitudes, personality, level of flexibility/rigidity, extraversion/introversion, locus of control, self-efficacy, general and verbal intelligence;
- formal qualifications and experience: formal qualifications, teachers’ continuous working experience;
- methodological competences: for example the capacity to apply different learning strategies; and
- pedagogical content knowledge: pedagogical methods by which specificities of the subject matter are adapted and delivered to learners. (p. 23)

According to Hargreaves and Fullan (2012), “Making decisions in complex situations is what professionalism is about” (p. 5). They have, furthermore, highlighted the role of decision-making within the concept of professional capital, which they consider as a strategy that can strengthen the profession of teaching. Professional capital, as they define it, consists of human, social and decisional capitals, essential for effective teaching and for “transforming the teaching profession into a force for the common good” (p. 88).

The changing role of education referred to as “social role”, calls into question many aspects of the traditional classroom that has one teacher as the controller. Classrooms have gradually been transformed from this scenario into teaching with a democratic approach to working with students, where the focus is also more on team teaching and learning with mixed ability groups (Tomlinson, 2005). This democratic approach is in line with both national and international emphases on inclusive and multicultural education, which requires teachers to respond to students’ individual needs (EU Commission, 2017;

OECD, 2010) and to be able to make decisions accordingly. Such school cultures are seen to promote conditions for sustainable change and learning and have a positive impact on teaching practices and student achievement (Hall & Hord, 2011; Louis, 2010).

Inclusive and multicultural education is seen as the means of working with the reality that students differ from each other in multiple ways (Ragnarsdóttir & Schmidt, 2014; Sapon-Shevin, 2007). Adopting a pedagogy based on inclusive and multicultural education with a focus on diversity in teachers' professional practices will help future teachers to view diversity as the norm, rather than a problem (Banks, 2010). However, to be able to do this, teacher education needs to offer future teachers the opportunity to interact and talk about diversity and differences at a professional level. According to Kozleski, Gonzales, Atkinson, Mruczek, and Lacy (2013) teachers need opportunities to understand through dialogue, for example, the underlying narratives around culture and differences. Part of this process is being aware of and understanding their own circumstances and worldviews. OECD documents (2010) on teacher education highlight diversity as a resource and a right. Educational settings are valuable opportunities for working on personal development, interpersonal understanding and connectedness in schools and communities. According to the OECD document on diversity (2010), teachers are capable of making an important contribution to helping students prepare for living in a society characterized by rapidly changing cultural, social and economic conditions.

Taken together, the discussion and focus on teachers' professionalism has moved beyond the classical definition towards implying democratic values and a common quest for knowledge (see also Ifanti & Fotopoulou, 2011). Furthermore, Hargreaves (2000) has pointed out that the increasing effort to build strong professional cultures of collaboration also requires high-quality leadership where teachers are inspired to retain their autonomy of decision making when working with students and placing educational and pedagogical issues at the forefront.

## Context of the course and the study

The course *Comparative Studies in Education with a Focus on Inclusion in a Baltic-Nordic Context* (<https://nordplus.ucl.dk/eksempel-side/intensive-courses/>) took place in autumn 2015 and was funded by Nordplus. The participants were pre-service teacher and social pedagogue students from two Baltic countries, Latvia and Lithuania, and all five Scandinavian countries, Iceland, Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Finland, 28 students in all, both male and female. One teacher from each country was responsible for teaching on the course.

The course was organized in three parts: two intensive weeks in two different countries and five weeks of distance learning in between. The main activities of the course were theoretical lectures, group work, social activities, school visits and presentations by students and teachers. The intensive course addressed comparative studies in education in a broad context in connection with inclusive education, and the two aspects were seen from

the perspective of life-long learning in formal and non-formal contexts. The intensive course worked with the following objectives:

- Developing participating students' professional competences for organizing teaching and learning processes in order that pupils and learners in general and of different abilities and capabilities can learn inclusively
- Deepening the students' intercultural and multilingual orientation
- Strengthening the students' abilities to look into different age-groups, subjects, areas, cultural settings
- Developing the students' skills in producing their own examples of activities for an 'inclusive practice'
- Allowing participating students to compare and reflect on own and other educational systems and practices
- Supporting the students to focus on reflection as well as including explicitly theoretical contents in their assessments and presentations
- Further motivation on inclusion of out-door settings encouraging the work together explicitly giving a more flexible time-table thereby creating more space for discussions, activities, and reflections
- Implementing the host students by asking them to welcome and introduce their home area in a positive and including way
- Encouraging the students in their work by carrying out a little comparative survey and a presentation of their thoughts on inclusion in different cultural settings, and good practices in the chosen field.

The students were divided into mixed nationality groups, which were each given the assignment to design a workshop or interactive presentation. Besides formal studying, the students were very involved in informal situations and also spent almost all of their free time together.

## Methods

To explore the topic of professionalism, the researchers used a semi-structured group interview (also called a focus group) to collect data and information. Qualitative group interviews are used when a researcher tries to understand the world from the subjects' point of view, to unfold the meaning of their experiences, and to uncover their lived life world prior to scientific explanations (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 1). Here, the intention was to broaden and deepen the researchers' knowledge of the students' professional experiences and the benefits they gained from the CSEI course. Semi-structured group interviews were useful to focus on the chosen theme while the informants could discuss matters in an open and flexible way. This would provide information on the students' experiences and reflections on the course and how these might influence their future work as professional teachers. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009, p. Xvii) emphasize that interviews,



where the researchers can ask questions and listen to people communicating about their life experiences, is the best way to collect data from the informants' life world/social life. A common interview guide was used, including questions such as: 1. What did you learn during the week that you think is beneficial for you professionally in the future? 2. What other professional benefits do you think you gained? (from the viewpoint of your future profession). 3. How do you think you will use the knowledge and experiences you gained in your future?

Students from the same institution and of the same nationality formed groups that were interviewed by their teachers. This was partly for practical reasons because the interviews did not take place until a couple of weeks after the course as there was only limited time available to conduct interviews during the course. The authors also believe that by doing this a few weeks after the course the students had had the opportunity to reflect on their experience. The authors also see it as a strength that the students/informants and teachers/researchers in each group share a common language and cultural background. This can strengthen the dialogue and reduce misunderstandings. Since students and teachers already know one another, it can also create trust and a friendly atmosphere, helping to improve communication during the interviews.

Even though the students' English skills varied considerably, both within the groups and between different nationalities, we decided to conduct all interviews in English as this was also the course language. Since they shared a native language, they could support one another in the communication process by code-switching when they did not find words to express themselves individually in the group. The researchers were aware that the differences in English skills might influence the data and results but considered it an advantage to have a common research language. To translate the interviews from different languages into English might have also created other problems. However, for the data analysis, we needed a common language: we wanted any researcher to be able to analyse the transcripts, but also to verify and increase the validity of the analysis across language barriers.

Twenty-three students from six different countries were interviewed (4 males and 19 females). All the teachers, with one exception, decided to participate in the research, and thus the data from the students of the one exception was not available. The quality of a study is not only dependent on appropriate methodology, but also on the suitability of the sampling strategy (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). All students in the CSEI programme, with the exception of four from one of the Baltic countries, were student teachers in primary school education. The other four were social pedagogue students. Since the main aim was to explore the professional benefits for the future within the education sector, it made no significant difference that they were studying different professions.

Thematic analysis was used to explore and analyse the data from the transcribed interviews. This method is widely used and scrutinized in detail by Braun and Clarke (2006) who argue that it is a flexible method, which can potentially provide a rich and detailed, yet complex, account of data. The recursive process of analysis is described in several

steps: (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, and (4) defining and naming themes. The researchers did not follow these steps in detail, but the process helped us to identify, analyse and report patterns or themes within the collected data, and formed the basis for the transformation to codes and categorization (e.g., Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 202). Since many researchers (six) were involved, it was time-consuming and laborious work to analyse and develop a shared understanding of the data. This was done both by holding virtual meetings where the themes and their relevant aspects were discussed and by sharing documents electronically.

### **Challenges and validity**

The authors recognize that certain challenges may have influenced the data and results of the study. The researchers faced several challenges due to being a group emanating from different countries. In qualitative interviews like this, the researcher is the key research instrument of the inquiry (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). This was a case of researchers from six different countries who needed to cooperate, communicate and create a shared understanding and achieve results despite different backgrounds relating to formal education, knowledge, skills and practical experiences of the topic to be explored. An additional challenge was their double role as teachers and researchers in the programme, and the way this could influence data collection, analysis, and results. As teachers in the programme, the researchers would probably have preferred positive answers from the students about their roles as leaders representing different countries and on the course as a whole; this may have affected how students discussed their learning experience. We needed to be critical towards overly positive comments and results. The design, questions, and interviewer may influence the students' replies. Language challenges facing the students may also be an ethical dilemma. For some students, varying skills in English might cause a stressful situation if they lack adequate words to express themselves. We had to be aware of this and help the students to be confident in the interview situation.

### **Results of the study**

The main results of the study are presented under the following headings: the students' understanding of professionalism, the broadening of students' professional experiences, and the contribution of the course to their future work as professionals.

#### **Students' understanding of professionalism**

When we analysed the data, several themes related to professionalism emerged: *teaching strategies, subject knowledge, cooperation, critical reflection, noticing and respecting differences, and student/pupil/child in focus.*



*Teaching strategies.* The interviewees thought that teachers should have various teaching strategies or methods that are developed and communicated. This also includes possessing a theoretical base for the use of different methods and activities and having explored applicable concepts in depth. One group described differences between the country groups and admired the Finnish students when it came to theoretical groundwork:

They are somehow, like when we sat down for the first time and started talking about our work ... and then one from Finland started right away to think about and say ... well, the studies/theories say this and that ... we do it like this ... according to theory ... they always mentioned some concepts/terms in this regard and it seems more natural for them to talk about theory. (Iceland)

Group work was particularly emphasized by all the students. The students also expressed the opinion that the methods should be chosen according to the individual needs of the pupil.

*Cooperation.* The students clearly felt that cooperating is an important aspect of being a professional teacher. For this, the teacher needs to have knowledge of group work methods and co-teaching. Additionally, social and communication skills are considered of great importance.

The first thing, co-teaching was new /.../I actually think it is more useful to actually know that we are doing this, we have to plan for this co-teaching it's not just something that is, because that's the way we work. We have to plan all these texts to do, I like this result when you compete against each other so much that you don't even know who is the expert on this and who is the expert on what is good for children." (Sweden)

For the first time, I have learned to cooperate with other people who belong to another cultural background than mine. In modern times social competences become more important than rational knowledge. (Lithuania)

*Critical reflection.* The students stated that working as a teacher means that you need to be creative and able to see things from different perspectives and use these abilities for critical reflection. The students mentioned the benefits of gaining new ideas, knowledge of other countries and school systems. They stressed the acquisition of new ideas, learning from others and becoming more confident as a teacher.

*Noticing and respecting differences.* The students emphasized that noticing and respecting difference is an important aspect of being a professional teacher, in relation to both colleagues and pupils. Furthermore, in their view, a teacher needs to face difference and accept different ideas. In relation to pupils, this means respecting and involving everyone, creating an environment for everyone, and explaining things in different ways. Communication is a key word.

*Student/pupil/child in focus.* Additionally, the students thought that a professional teacher should be aware of differences, that we are all different, and that it is something positive. But this requires the teacher to know all the pupils, to be able to communicate with all of them, to listen to them, to involve all of them and to adapt the school environment in such a way that it benefits all pupils; that is, focus on the child/pupil/student.

*Subject knowledge.* The Lithuanian and the Icelandic students were the only ones who mentioned the need for subject knowledge, although they spoke about it differently. A Lithuanian student reflected on this topic when speaking about a school visit:

... I was really impressed that the teacher should know all of them, because, as the head teacher said; if you want that the students to know all these subjects, first of all, the teacher has to know all these subjects. (Lithuania)

The Icelandic student mentioned subject knowledge when discussing the balance within teacher and student education: “Yeah, that’s very important, it was a kind of crash course in actual teaching, I would think because here we study more about the topics that we are going to be teaching... not so much about teaching.”

### **Students’ professional experiences**

Three themes emerged when the authors analysed the students’ professional experiences: *sharing knowledge and building a network for the future, challenging yourself as a teacher, and gaining deeper understanding by discussing differences.*

*Sharing knowledge and building a network for the future.* The studies in the CSEI course were very much built around group activities and students were also encouraged to socialize in their free time in the evenings. Therefore, it is no surprise that the students talked about building a network as one of their professional experiences. A comment from a Norwegian student was an example of students’ thoughts on this:

First of all, I think that I got to know a lot of other people from other countries, and I think this is of value because you get a sort of network throughout the Nordic and Baltic countries, and that kind of relationship is good for the profession, I think. (Norway)

The students discussed the importance of this future network in relation to seeking and sharing advice among colleagues. By sharing knowledge, for example on similarities and differences between countries, they were able to discuss some controversial issues and to build professional partnerships. A Latvian student said: “We have a lot of different opinions as to what is ‘inclusive education’ in Latvia, but what is it for example in some Nordic countries, Sweden etc?” Students saw the benefit of reflecting on subjects from different perspectives. The Swedish students discussed preschool pedagogy:

<...>it was not new to us, ....and a lot of things were repetitions from earlier courses ... but you reflected on it once more and ... I think it is quite nice to get a chance for repetition as well, in a bigger context ... to compare to other countries. (Sweden)

*Challenge yourself as a teacher.* The student teachers talked about various teaching methods and saw this as a learning process both for themselves as future teachers and as students. Here, a Finnish student reflects upon group work they witnessed on a school visit in Iceland:

<...>because the students have to learn this, [group work] the teachers should also know it. They cannot go there and say; yeah, I don't know how to take care of that, but you [the pupil] have to learn it anyway. (Finland)

This experience, although new and even somewhat overwhelming, encouraged them to be open to trying new things and challenging themselves. The Finnish student recalled an experience on the school visit in Iceland where pupils were taught in big groups and teachers worked in teams: "I liked the cooperation, between the different teachers ... and that the subject teachers also taught everything else besides their own subject, I find that really interesting ... also challenging."

*Gaining deeper understanding by discussing differences.* Through reflection and discussion, the students recognized comparative aspects. The Swedish group reflected upon the discussion on inclusion and how it has developed within the Nordic countries compared with the Baltic countries:

I think it was quite interesting to compare [discussing inclusion], as it happens in the Scandinavian countries and the Baltic countries... because of the difference... I think that perhaps broadened my perspective that we have it quite good. (Sweden)

One of the course activities was a panel discussion by the teachers on inclusive education and its various and contradictory perspectives. For the students, it was a new learning experience to witness the ways their teachers presented differing opinions on the topic. Some of them mentioned that the panel discussions were a bit confusing and they realized that theoretical issues can be quite messy. One of the Finnish students expressed it this way: "<...>it was like, all right, I don't have to understand the point, the whole point ... and you can have, like, different kinds of views. It's not as if this is the fact, this is correct .... " The students realized that to formulate your own opinion a lot of discussion is needed, as this Finnish student states: "<...>after that you can, like, make your own view ... what's inclusion.»"

These reflections were a step into professional thinking and the students realized, during the board panel discussion, that they would not receive a fixed answer to the question: What is inclusion? However, such a platform had given them the confidence to believe that inclusion is something they could also think of in different ways, just as their teachers or well-known scholars did. Discussing different perspectives opened them up to something more:

I think our knowledge deepened in every aspect and I think it makes us a little more confident—I knew what inclusion was before but I really ... after the course, I understand it in more depth ... the meaning of inclusion ... I saw more how we are excluding ... even though we say we are including ... so I am more critical about everything when we say we are including. (Iceland)

### **The contribution of the course to future work as professionals**

*Appropriate knowledge and behavior.* The students considered and evaluated the kind of knowledge and behavior appropriate in the classroom, as may be gathered from the following quote:

At least I got some kind of vision of inclusion and that is definitely something. They [the discussions] are useful in my future or anyway right now here in school—at least something about how different kinds of people can be included in the group and...and I got some thoughts as to how I would like to act with different kinds of pupils; yeah, and also how I don't want to act. I saw situations I wouldn't like to do with or in front of my class. (Finland)

*Use of different methods.* The use of different methods was seen as creating opportunities for future professional development. Students will be able to choose and recognize how to implement the principle of inclusiveness in the classroom, as this Lithuanian student says: “<...>in the future, inclusion education will be more and more advanced because the world is going towards globalization so all people would like to learn new things, new methods.”

*Experience and knowledge.* The students were sure they would use the experience and knowledge they gained during the course activities that took place between the lectures and seminars, as demonstrated by a student from Latvia: “I'll try it to put into practice in my work with children especially things like drama, mindfulness, co-teaching, origami methods.”

*Different views and perspectives.* Students felt that they have been learning to respect different views and perspectives and have become more open-minded:

<...>yes, we have to respect their point of view and that can be difficult to do because we are maybe taught that their view is wrong, but we cannot say that their way is the wrong way because it is their culture. (Iceland)

*Internationalization of the learning process.* The course encouraged students to think about the international environment and the internationalization of the learning process, as confirmed by this student from Norway:

I will use my new experiences in cooperating with different people, because I don't know what the future might bring, maybe I will move abroad some time, and then I have a little bit of knowledge about their school systems and their backgrounds and how they work, so it may be easier for me to cooperate with the others from other countries. (Norway)

*Awareness of new challenges and critical reflections.* The students became more aware of new challenges and will not be afraid to adopt new ideas in their future schools. They have become more critical of inclusion, which could influence their professionalism in future:

Yes, I would say the same, because I can picture myself when I start to work as a teacher. We will probably be a team that will talk about the challenges we have and everything, and I think it's important that we can take some good ideas from other countries as well because we don't necessarily have the best prescription or whatever. (Norway)

The findings allow us to conclude that international courses can serve as developers of students' understanding of professionalism, broadening their professional experiences, and contributing to their future work as professionals. In this case, it came as a result of the course on developing the professionalism of future teachers in the Scandinavian and Baltic states.

## Discussion

One of the main results of this study concerns co-operation and the opportunities the intensive course gave to the students for developing skills to work together with different people, to appreciate difference and to learn from others. In other words, they can become more open-minded professionals. This contribution is also emphasized by the students as important for them as professionals. This connects with what Kozleski et al. (2013) have pointed out, namely that teachers need opportunities to understand diversity and differences through dialogue.

According to our results, during the course, the students have learned about and discussed the various elements of teachers' work and what teachers need to find in their future toolbox. This includes knowledge and skills, teaching strategies or methods, the latter of which group work was a favorite, and a theoretical base (Tomlinson, 2005). The students considered that a teacher needs to be creative and see things from different perspectives (“<...> yes, we have to respect their point of view <...>”(Iceland)), as well as being capable of critical reflection (“<...>it's important that we can take some good ideas from other countries as well because we don't necessarily have the best prescription or whatever” (Norway)). This is in line with the point that teachers should be able to meet students' multiple and diverse needs (EU Commission, 2017) and the views of Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) on the importance of the role of making decisions; thus, decision capital is an essential element in teachers' professionalism.

The findings also show that the students believe in the importance of cooperating with colleagues, for example through discussions, reflection, and co-teaching. This was something they practiced throughout the course, in group assignments, in the social activities they planned and led, and in various discussions. According to Sachs (2016), this is an aspect in which teachers need one another to develop their own professionalism. In his discussion on mature professions, which takes a transformative view of teachers' professionalism, Sachs (2016) has highlighted the point that teachers should be seen as creative designers of curricula, and actively collaborating on a deep level with colleagues and students.

Furthermore, the results indicate that the students' competence in choosing and using appropriate methods did indeed develop through practical activities and this is, in their opinion, useful for their future as teachers. Prospective teachers recognize the importance of broad perspectives and open-mindedness when reflecting on future solutions.

In addition, during the course, the students were involved in critical discussions and reflections and experienced contradictory perspectives, for instance on inclusion, which helped them to gain a deeper understanding of the concept. They realized that there is no fixed definition of such concepts (Sapon-Shevin, 2007) but through discussions, they became able to understand that multiple realities call for multiple definitions (Ragnarsdóttir & Schmidt, 2014). The authors maintain that this kind of experience can contribute to the way in which students build their own professional theory to guide them in their future work. However, according to, for example, Hoyle (2001) and Ingvarsdóttir (2004), such a theory is based on the interplay of several elements: theoretical knowledge, experience-based knowledge, and ethical values. The students in our study have gained a clearer view as to what elements they hope to foster in their future work as teachers, and through the discussions of contradictory perspectives, students were able to challenge themselves and their own views, a process that opened up new perspectives and knowledge.

The CSEI course was both international and interactive. Students worked in mixed national groups on activities that required them to discuss, share and receive knowledge from their colleagues. The findings show that the students see the course as *an added value* to their teacher education and their future work as teachers. They highlighted the way the course served as a step toward building a professional network for the future. Sharing knowledge on the differences between countries stimulated discussion on controversial issues, both in a general and an educational sense. According to Robson (2011), it is important that students gain the opportunity to study in various contexts, such as with their peers of different origins or cultures, in order to gain intercultural experience. By taking part in panel discussions, the students came to understand that fixed answers to contradictory questions and concepts do not exist. As Parsons (2010) and Rizvi (2009) point out, students can re-think their position in the world by engaging in emotional and intellectual real task processes. Here we can see how the findings relate to the objectives and the context of the CSEI course (see more in this paper under the section Context of the course and the study), which include “Deepening the students’ intercultural and multilingual orientation” and “Allowing participating students to compare and reflect on own and other educational systems and practices”.

This small but international study demonstrates that a course as described here can promote the development of teachers’ professionalism. The participants in this study now better understand the significance of difference and open-mindedness in a globalized world and this allows us to draw the conclusion that the students concerned have appreciated its importance to themselves both now and as professionals in the future. The authors consider that providing such short-term internationalization opportunities is an important part of higher education and preparing to become a professional teacher or social pedagogue in the globalized future.



## Implications

Based on the theory, the regulations of the EU Commission, the documents of the countries involved, and the findings of this research study, a number of possibilities could be seen for future research and teacher education that would support future teachers in becoming professionals in teaching and learning. Future studies could be carried out both on a comparative basis as well as at the level of the individual countries because each country has its own historical and cultural background. Thus, future research could deepen aspects that were beginning to reveal themselves in this research, including, for example, the understanding of implementing professionalism in practice; ways of managing diversity through subject content; the use of different forms and methods, attitudes, behavior, and values.

A support system for young teachers and communication with schools and society could also be a field for future research with the aim of improving the education and practical training of future European and global teachers as well as assisting them in working in multicultural environments and managing diversity in their classrooms. The authors believe that the CSEI course has served as one component in this system of support along the road to becoming a professional, contemporary teacher. Nevertheless, it is important for the future to continue studying the significance of international networks, projects, seminars, and exchange mobility in order to further strengthen the professionalism and internationalization of higher educational institutions. It is possible to use material collected in universities during the teaching and learning process for the benefit of future teachers as well as for in-service training. The practical activities suggested in these materials could also serve teachers in schools for potential self-development because they are web-based. Another sector of future research could benefit from the views of the school students themselves on the learning process in school. Teachers and students are partners in this learning process and therefore it is essential to apply a complex approach in teacher education research.

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